

## REVIEW

### Poverty and insecurity - Life in low-pay, no-pay Britain

Tracy Shildrick, Robert MacDonald, Colin Webster and Kayleigh Garthwaite  
Bristol: Policy Press, 2012, 256 pages  
ISBN 978-1-84742-910-0

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This book is based on original research conducted by the authors for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which was an element of a wider programme that sought to investigate 'recurrent poverty'. It focuses on the lives of individuals and families living in or near poverty despite their enduring commitment to work and repeated engagement with employment. It is the fourth in a series of studies of the same neighbourhoods carried out by the authors. This provides a longitudinal element which is often lacking in such discussions. The book comprises ten accessible, engaging and well-written chapters.

The Introduction sets out the intention of the book which is to challenge the return of an 'old libel': the poor are so because of their own failings - their weakness of character, their idleness, their culture and way of life. The empirical data presented is firmly grounded in the real lives of people living in Teesside and is intended to stand as a corrective to the myth-making of politicians. This it does admirably although whether mainstream politicians of any political hue will be receptive is another matter.

Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical and empirical terrain of the book. It introduces theoretical debates and empirical research about poverty; the changing nature of work and the claim that a new class termed the 'precariat' has arisen. There is much valuable material here but I found the thread a little difficult to follow. The rise of the precariat is, for example, followed by a brief historical sketch of poverty and welfare going back to Elizabethan times before some contemporary labour market myths are outlined.

Chapter 3 discusses the research and locates it geographically in Middlesbrough in North East England. We learn that Teesside is not typical of the processes of socio-economic change in the UK. The shift from rural backwater to industrial powerhouse that occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was remarkable. The scope and speed of its economic collapse in the 1970s and 80s and the roots of employment decline in high capital investment in steel, chemicals and heavy engineering are equally unusual. The result is that the nature of work available to local residents has undergone profound change over the past three decades. Full-time male manual jobs

in manufacturing have been replaced with service sector and 'new' manufacturing jobs that are non-unionised, low skilled, poorly paid and often taken by women. This is a narrative familiar to working class communities across the nation.

Chapter 4 investigates the views of employers and welfare-to-work practitioners with regard to the labour market barriers experienced by the unemployed in Middlesbrough. It is based on 13 interviews. The authors identify the proliferation of agencies and support services and their competitive ethos as a key labour market barrier. Perhaps not surprisingly, practitioners rehearse the usual litany of individual failings including the idea that a 'culture of worklessness' prevents many from taking up the available opportunities. It is, however, salient to note that many of those moving rapidly into and out of precarious employment will not register as unemployed and consequently will rarely come into contact with welfare-to-work practitioners of the sort interviewed by the authors.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 seek to describe and analyse the low-pay, no-pay cycle from the point of view of those caught up in it. The stories of Debbie, Don and Pamela give a depressing flavour of the hard, physically and mentally demanding work done by many. This is the real strength of the book. The authors find that a culture of work, rooted in working-class history and culture, characterises many of those interviewed. This is supported by much of my own work exploring the work undertaken by residents of deprived working class communities (see Fletcher, 2007). However, they find that precarious work is not providing a stepping-stone to better work. This begs an important question about the sustainability of such a cultural attachment to work when it manifestly does not materially improve the lives of working people. Willis (1977) has, for example, speculated that structural unemployment might underpin the development of a 'white ethnic culture of wagelessness' among some sections of white youth. This book provides little comfort for this view.

The poor school experiences and low skills of many respondents are identified as a key issue. Similarly, interviewees were overwhelmingly negative about their contact with Jobcentre Plus. This will be familiar territory to many readers. Nevertheless, my own research suggests that it is the quality of the relationship between the individual and the personal adviser that largely determines views of Jobcentre Plus. A more fundamental problem is the growing mismatch between the Jobcentre Plus approach to matching individuals to work which relies on CVs and polished interview skills and the informal work increasingly secured by many at the bottom of the labour market. The latter is predominantly sourced through family, friends and acquaintances. This allows some groups like offenders to bypass the discrimination that they face in the mainstream labour market. The role of private employment agencies in sustaining precarious work is detailed but is also well known.

Chapter 8 considers some of the 'supply-side' factors such as ill-health and caring that inhibit engagement with work. At the outset, the link between bad jobs and ill-health is well made. Interviewees talked about work having negative consequences for their physical and mental health. Depression was, perhaps not surprisingly, a widespread problem. The authors point out that ill health becomes amplified as a 'supply-side' barrier when the type of work available, on the 'demand-side' is so unforgiving to workers when they are ill. All of which counters the prevailing notion that work is good for personal health. As with so many social outcomes it is the quality of work that matters.

Chapter 9 examines the consequences of long-term labour market insecurity and recurrent returns to work. A key finding is that many of those interviewed did not consider themselves to be poor and were keen to distance themselves from other groups. Young (2003) explains popular demands for punitive welfare with reference to

relative deprivation which engenders a feeling that those who work a little or not at all are getting an easy ride. The distancing of those interviewed from the 'undeserving poor' also illustrates the power of ideas about the self-inflicted nature of poverty. Interviewees frequently stressed their ability to 'get by' as a means of distancing themselves from the shame of poverty. The authors are surely right in seeing the renouncement of poverty at an individual level as a means of buttressing self-respect in social conditions that are increasingly hostile to 'the poor'. It should come as no surprise that the low-pay no-pay cycle did not enable people to escape from poverty and debts loomed large in the lives of many. It emerges that problems accessing benefits was a key reason why many went into debt. The reliance on family and friends is a recurring theme and extends to borrowing small sums in order to make ends meet.

The final chapter seeks to connect the findings of the present study with broader debates. The authors debunk the myth of the 'high skills economy' thesis. They point out that low paid, low skilled work remains abundant and that even workers with high skills, such as graduates, increasingly have to compete for such work. Moreover, they argue that those undertaking poor work are a 'stagnant reserve army of labour' who perform a crucial function in the post-industrial economy. It is in this context that welfare-to-work policies are conceptualised as a means of forcing individuals to undertake poor work in flexible labour markets. This argument is persuasive and has been made by others such as Wacquant (2009) in his book *Punishing the Poor: The neoliberal government of social insecurity*.

The book concludes with a discussion of possible measures to tackle poor work and so improve the lives of those at the bottom of the labour market. In the US Osterman (2008) has, for example, argued improving low wage work is the next frontier of labour market policy but this message needs to be 'sold' to employers in terms of their own self-interest. Policies promoting a 'Living Wage', contract compliance and the development of 'career ladders' within large employers are all highlighted. The authors concede that this runs counter to the prevailing hegemony and would do little to combat the inequalities inherent in capitalism.

I found it a little surprising that there is no discussion of the potential role of trade unions given that their demise is a key contributory factor behind many of the problems of low pay charted by this book. At present the danger is that trade unions are becoming increasingly focussed on protecting the rights of white collar, well-educated public sector workers. It is my view that they should be in the vanguard of efforts to combat growing work insecurity and poverty. Glyn (2006) in *Capitalism Unleashed* examines the extraordinary turnaround of the fortunes of capital and labour over the past thirty years. This is exemplified by the Chairman of the US Federal Reserve calling for companies to cut their profits in order to raise wages! Understanding how this has happened is a vital first step in devising policies to advance the cause of egalitarianism. The present book makes a modest contribution to this debate. Its inestimable value is to give a much needed voice to the poor and in doing so begin to challenge the 'old libel' that informs much contemporary policy making.

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